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Whole grains protect against cancer

NEW YORK, Jun 23 (Reuters) -- Consumption of whole grain foods, particularly breads and pasta, may protect against a variety of cancers, according to a study. Dr. Liliane Chatenoud from Milan, Italy, and colleagues studied more than 10,000 hospital patients with a variety of cancers and almost 8,000 patients treated for non-cancerous conditions between 1983 and 1996 in northern Italy. The patients filled out questionnaires about their medical history, smoking habits, consumption of alcohol and intake of a variety of foods, especially whole grains. "High intake of whole grain foods consistently reduced risk of (cancer) at all sites, except thyroid," the researchers write in the International Journal of Cancer. Specifically, the researchers say a diet with many whole grain foods lowered the risk of various cancers, including those affecting the digestive tract (stomach, colon, rectum, liver, pancreas and gall bladder), and those outside the digestive system, including cancers of the upper respiratory tract, breast, prostate, ovary, bladder, and kidney. The investigators do not offer any conclusive reason why whole grains reduce cancer risk. But they speculate that because whole grains have more insoluble and soluble fiber, they spend less time in the digestive tract. Whole grains may also have antioxidant effects, reducing the risk of cancer by "mopping up" cancer-causing free radical molecules formed during some cells processes. "It is also possible that more frequent whole grain consumption simply implies a lower intake of refined grains, which have been associated with elevated risk of colorectal, breast, and perhaps other cancer sites," the researcher write. SOURCE: International Journal of Cancer 1998;77:24-28.